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Green Party MLA for North Down, Brian Wilson address Northern Ireland Assembly calling for an independent Environmental Protection Agency.

I am disappointed that the Minister for the Environment Arlene Foster cannot accept the case for an independent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The case for the EPA is a no-brainer, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel described another issue last week. It is disappointing that we could not get agreement today. The case made by all the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has the support of the public. Moreover, we have to set up some form of EPA to comply with European directives.

Discussions on the establishment of an EPA have persisted since 1962, so it is about time that something was done. We have gone through many inquiries and there is no need for any more investigations. The issues have been covered many times, and amendment No 1 is an excuse for further delay.

We must also consider European law and how it is interpreted by our judiciary. Judge Weatherup says that the present system is inadequate and that it does not comply with European law, and that something must be done about that.

At a recent seminar in Belfast the chairman of the UK Environmental Law Association commented that Northern Ireland was the dirty corner of the UK when it came to protecting the environment, and added that Northern Ireland had a uniquely serious problem of weak environmental regulation and enforcement.

Northern Ireland has ignored the environment for too long, and we seem to be doing it again today. We have not looked at the impact that development is having on our environment.

The other countries of the United Kingdom introduced legislation in the 1970s and 1980s, as did the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland is now starting to catch up — but we are doing it very slowly, because we continue to pump raw sewage into the watercourses and the sea. I have been campaigning to end the dumping of raw sewage into Belfast Lough for more than a decade, because of the impact that it has on beaches. The Department of the Environment seems to have little concern about that, and the Environment and Heritage Service is totally ineffective.

The power station at Kilroot is the dirtiest in the UK; and although Lough Neagh is one of the most polluted lakes in Europe, it is the source of most of our drinking water. The European Court of Justice has found Northern Ireland guilty on many occasions of failing to meet minimum standards set out by European directives. Environmental pressure groups continually highlight the inadequate protection of existing wildlife, sewage pollution and poor planning as areas where the DOE has failed to protect the environment.

In 1990 the House of Commons Environment Committee called for the establishment of an environmental protection agency. The Environment and Heritage Service already deals with many of the issues that an EPA would, but it is not independent, which led to the situation in 2002, for example, in which the Environment and Heritage Service's concerns over housing hotspots were ignored to let more house-building take place, and so raw sewage went on being pumped into Belfast Lough.

This is a conflict between the Department of the Environment and an independent body. A piece in today's 'Belfast Telegraph' reports that the Environment and Heritage Service recommended that the planning application for the Giant's Causeway — an argument I have no intention of entering — be rejected, and yet the Minister is minded to approve it. That shows the potential for conflict in the Department. That is why we need an independent environmental protection agency.

The resources are already there but are not being used efficiently or effectively. They do not have the correct legislative balance, so they appear ineffective.

We have a long list of problems to solve, but we should proceed with the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency. I would like the Minister to give that commitment. An environmental protection agency would help us to lose our image as the dirty corner of the UK and would allow us to present Northern Ireland as having a green and clean environment that can attract tourists and investment.